~~Great~~ Expectations

This session topic makes me nervous. There are a few reasons for this and hopefully all of them will play out over the course of this paper. But I should state from the outset, it's not because I do not support such a session topic. Compiling a bunch of eccentric architects into the same room to describe why and how they have altered or deviated from some normal path? Sounds great to me! I love strange things and transgressive characters who break rules; it's the reason I'm submitting this application to be part of your club!

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Like everyone else in architecture, I want to be weird, special, and somehow different. I definitely do not want to be normal. I mean, aren't all architects desperate to be [a little] different? Or - in the terms of this session topic - a little "deviant"?

But do you sometimes think we're all a little too desperate? Because the idea that we would all show up and present to the rest of the group how we are different, how we have strayed from the expected path, strikes me as problematic. It all seems a bit normal. By this point, you are probably aware of where I'm going. And rightly so! It's a completely obvious point. Because we can't all be different, can we? In a world of architectural weirdos, what represents normal? I'm posing these annoying rhetorical queries, because I'm not sure what we're straying from anymore. You pick the term: standard, norm, convention, custom, etc.... and in architecture, as in most other social contexts, locating exactly what is required or expected is becoming increasingly difficult. The thing I'd like to figure out is whether this confusion is the reason for or the result of the projects that this session is pointing at—all the conferences, symposiums, exhibitions, and syllabi mentioned in this session's call for papers? I'm sure there are more, but two things come to mind: Rem's call for a return to fundamentals at the 2014 Venice Biennale and the often-misunderstood rise of "Normcore" as a style, first in fashion and now in architecture.

For me, the problem with these fundamentalist yearnings isn't that they can't seem to locate the center they claim to search for – they can't and it was never an earnest search to begin with - instead, the problem with them is the same problem (in a good way!) that's embedded in this session topic. In all cases, there is the assumption that something normal or standard or conventional or customary still exists. And maybe that's just it! Maybe that is what we are supposed to be learning with all these things. It's an oversimplification, but rather than think of this moment as a series of earnest attempts to be normal or establish new normals, we

might think of it as a series of attempts to find something that no longer exists, which results in the production of an ongoing state of collective disciplinary confusion.

The expectation of a norm or a set of norms is the best way I can describe architecture's current situation. And to make another obvious clarification when it might not be necessary, the expectation of a norm when none exists is a very different disciplinary milieu than one that acknowledges that none exists. In the latter case, we can just go on our merry way, bumbling around blindly bumping into each other as we play out a series of increasingly disparate scenarios that respond solely to conditions external to the discipline. Our conversations as architects become shorter. Most of the drawings disappear. We end up in the "real world". Alone. Instead, the expectation of a norm provides a context where we continue to talk to each other - in confused and awkward ways - about a shared interest in something we collectively think (still) exists, even if it does not.

For some, this may seem like a fairly dark scenario I'm painting. We can either be alone (and scared) or together (and confused). But from the tone of each of my descriptions, I think it should be clear which one I prefer. It is one thing to want to be different, but quite another thing to be so different that you end up alone. The question for me is: if this is the last step before we finally realize there are no standards left, how can we prolong this state of collective confusion? What positive features and ways of working might benefit from a field that shares nothing but an expectation that we must share something, even if we can no longer locate it?

I'm not sure I have the answers to these questions. I doubt anyone does. And besides, that kind of clarity would work against the point I'm trying to make. Instead, I thought I'd address the idea of confusion in architecture as it relates to one of my own projects, and how an intentionally unstable relationship with an expected set of norms opened up new possibilities for a form of architecture that seems to be exhausting itself... the architecture installation. Similar to this paper, the project tried to reveal tendencies latent in a series of expectations or norms embedded in the production of an architectural installation. I refer here to the obvious things, the objects and images that are always part of the show, but also the other things. The things that take up much of the time and budget for an installation but remain peripheral when we start to address the content of the show. Things like posters, bios, headshots, fresh white paint, videos/trailers, construction schedules, specification manuals and all the other text based descriptions of the project. Increasingly architecture installations take on a series of things, more and more things, whose status as content or just technical support might be questioned.

In this project, each of these things, each task, each object, each text, each image, everything was viewed in isolation and stripped bare of all content in an attempt to reveal its latent form, structure and habits. The gallery itself was painted white. The floor was carpeted white. Three empty white pedestals were placed in the middle of the gallery.

For the poster (a contractual obligation by the host institution) a piece of paper was folded 3 times, creating a 2x3 grid. It was then photographed and the photograph was printed for the poster, which was also a piece of paper folded in the exact same way.

Figure 1: L: Poster R: Institutional Standard for Poster Folding, Diagram

Shaping New Knowledges
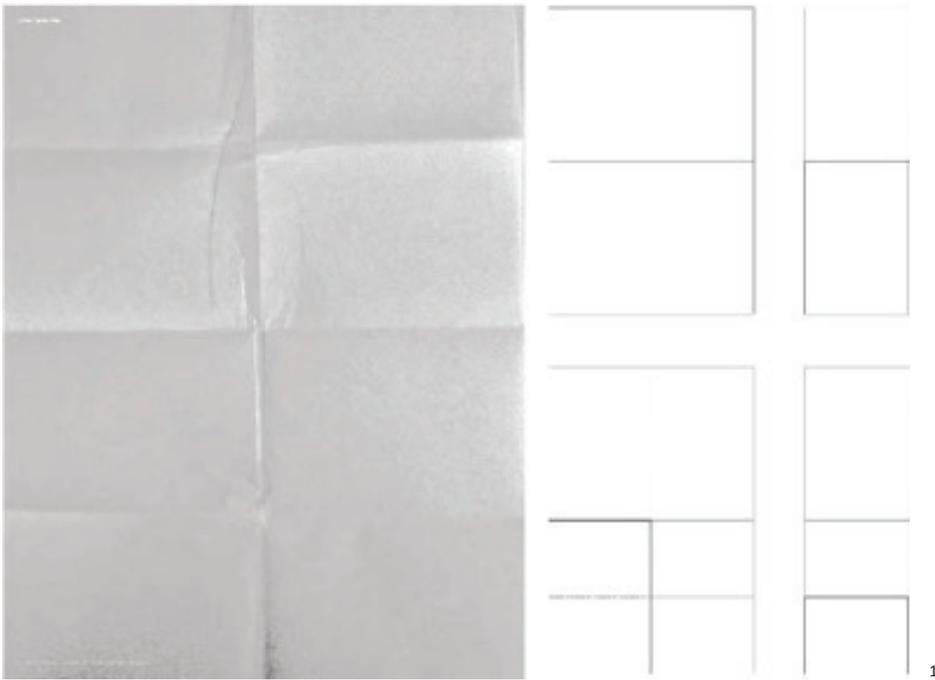
Outlets, vents and other wall coverings were added to the walls to enhance a set of compositional concerns found when drawing the interior elevations of the gallery. Some of the new outlets and vents worked. Some did not. Fans were placed on the top edge of a gallery wall to cool a series of projectors that hung from the ceiling. The projectors projected moving images of rotating white spheres into an already bright white room. The fans provided a dull ambient sound that muted outside noise.

A wall was built in the middle of the gallery dividing the space into two rooms. One room was filled with the empty content of the show – pedestals, projectors and carpet – the other was left empty and used for another contractual/institutional requirement, the gallery discussion.

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In each case, the project did not attempt to stray from any standard, norm or expectation. Instead, it tried to locate a standard by stripping bare each thing that was required or

Figure 1: L: Poster R: Institutional Standard for Poster Folding, Diagram

Figure 2:Photographs by Joshua White, Courtesy of SCI-Arc

expected as part of the show. The result was a seemingly blank installation that questioned

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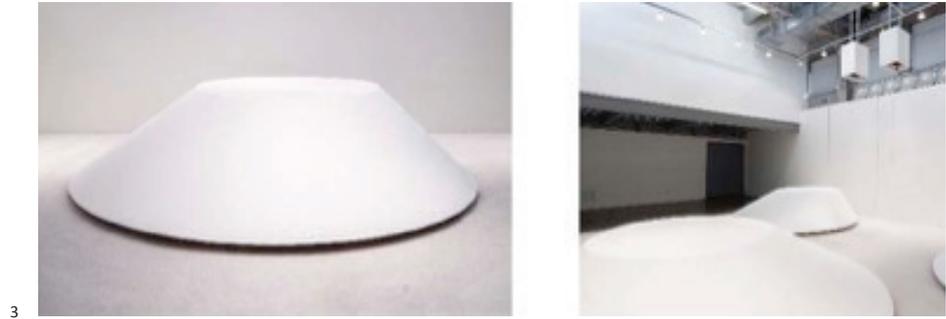
the status of the architecture installation as a specific form of architectural production and the specific value and function of each part. However, when it was complete and the gallery hosted the opening, the reaction to the work was not what I expected. Sure, a few people offered a token, "Congratulations!" but mostly people didn't say much. People seemed confused. The documentation of this confusion through its audience's reception occurred in a variety of ways but is best represented by the reaction of a key member of any installation team, the installation photographer.

According to Claire Bishop the photographic image we call, "the Installation Shot" is the

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reason why we call installations "installations". And like most things within this genre of architecture, we have looked to art as a source of authority on the matter.

"But there is a fine line between an installation of art and installation art. This ambiguity has been present since the terms first came into use in the 1960s. During this decade, the word "installation" was employed by art magazines to describe the way in which an exhibition was arranged. The photographic documentation of this arrangement was the term an "installations shot", and this gave rise to the use of the word for works that used the whole space as "installation art". Since then, the distance between an installation of works of art and "installation art" proper has become increasingly blurred. "

Figure 3:Photographs by Joshua White, Courtesy of SCI-Arc

Figure 4:Photographs by Joshua White, Courtesy of SCI-Arc

Joshua White took the installation photos for this installation. I had no input in the staging or specific subject matter of the photographs. White has photographed this space numerous times and is currently the photographer this institution hires for these kinds of assignments. While I did not ask him, it is probably safe to say he has photographed this gallery more than a dozen times. After he took the shots he remarked to me that he had never photographed

the space in this way and he was unsure what parts of the room were part of the installation and what parts were not. Like most of the audience he expressed confusion about the show. Did you put the "CCTV" sticker there? And the security camera? What about the fans? Were those your light bulbs? Or the gallery's? Each of his questions seemed to result in a photograph. Photographs of all the light switches, all the outlets, close ups of light bulbs and the fans. When he asked me, I did not respond directly but its safe to say he photographed a number of things that were there before I did my installation. And as I write this paper more than two years after the installation ended, many of those things remain there today, along with other things that I installed and never took out.

I relay this story of confusion by the person that is typically responsible for providing the final act of authorization in any installation because of the very productive set of questions raised by a context of disciplinary awkwardness and confusion. The type of confusion that can only result when one expects a certain set of standards or norms and is then confronted (repeatedly) by a situation that fails to produce or reinforce those expectations. In the case of the photographer and the dilemma he faced while trying to document the installation, we are left with a set of photographs that are strange in their insufficiency. It's not that the photographs are bad, but as one scrolls through them, starting with photographs of the whole space, then groups of pedestals, then individual pedestals, then detail shots of pedestals, then blank walls with outlets, then individual outlets, then light bulbs; we feel the search brought on by the photographer's confusion. What exactly is an installation? And is this really the best way to document what is going on here? What other formats would work? And if the installation shot is THE requirement for all installations, is this even an installation? A better question might be, as the degree and type of images that circulate rapidly increases, what privileged status does the installation shot still hold?

Like the two questions I posed earlier, I don't have answers. At this point, I am more interested in producing more questions. I am interested in the kinds of questions that are created

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when we encounter things that operate outside our abilities of rapid comprehension and clarity. If - as Hal Foster claims - abstraction has lost its ability to be "revolutionary, utopian, transcendental," we must find new ways to reimagine the world. Perhaps confusion will provide the way forward. Or maybe it's just me that confused?

Figure 5:Photographs by Joshua White, Courtesy of SCI-Arc

08_ENDNOTES TITLE

1. Claire Bishop. Installation Art. P 6. 2005.

2. Hal Foster. "At MOMA," London Review of Books. PP 13-14. Vol. 35 No. 3 Feb 2013.